

# Sweet Soul Symphonics: Thom Bell and the Stylistics

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THE STYLISTICS were a permanent fixture on the British pop charts of the early '70s. Every tenth record that came out of my tinny transistor radio in that time seemed to be another creamy hit by this Philadelphia vocal group. But when you're 12 years old and half in love with Marc Bolan, the last thing you want to hear is a seraphic black falsetto backed by oboes and bassoons - not to mention twelve violins, four violas, and two cellos.

The Stylistics, no less ubiquitous on our weekly TV showcase *Top of the Pops* in their silkspun Afros and ruffled tuxedos, embodied everything that was icky and comically formal about imported American soul in that decade. To testosterone teens waiting for Noddy Holder to come on and bawl 'Mama Weer All Crazee Now', the group seemed as cheesy as the umpteenth road edition of the Drifters entertaining the scampi-and-chips set at Batley's Variety Club.

So how is it that this former glam rock urchin - that would be me, then - came to adore the great hits the Stylistics chalked up in that long-unsung decade? Why do I now agree with Prince - who covered it - that 'Betcha By Golly Wow' is the most beautiful love song ever written? Why does 'You Make Me Feel Brand New', with its gloriously corny sitar, make me well up with love for my inamorata? How come I even retain a sweet-tooth soft spot for the ultra-tacky 'Sixteen Bars', and for 'I Can't Give You Anything But My Love', a song that sat at the top of the UK singles chart for what seemed to be the entire summer of 1975?

At least part of the reason is coming to realize - as any true fan of black American pop must - that producer/arranger/co-writer Thom Bell was *the* pre-eminent genius of symphonic soul, and that the songs he wrote with white Jewish lyricist Linda Creed (which didn't, incidentally, include 'Sixteen Bars' and 'I Can't Give You Anything...') represent the melodic peak of the fabled Philly sound. The records Bell made with the Stylistics, and with the Delfonics, the Spinners, Deniece Williams and others, are surely as close as soul music ever came to the subtlety, complexity and sheer beauty of Bach or Mozart. From the fanfare intro to the Delfonics' 'Ready or Not (Here I Come)' via the stunning charts he wrote for the O'Jays' 'Back Stabbers' to the intricate harpsichord links that grace Ronnie Dyson's 'Give In to Love', Thom Bell's ever-daring arrangements belie the classical training he received after moving to America from his native Jamaica as a child. (Lest we forget, he also wrote orchestral charts for Jerry Butler's 'Only the Strong Survive', Billy Paul's 'Me and Mrs. Jones', and Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' 'If You Don't Know Me By Now'.)

When he met the Stylistics in 1972, Bell had already been working as a pianist, arranger and producer on the Philly scene for over a decade. After a stint at Cameo-Parkway, home to Italian-American pretty boys of no discernible talent, he worked for Chubby Checker and then for Stan Watson's Philly Groove label, where he struck Delfonics gold with 'La La Means I Love You' and the majestic 'Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time'.) Influenced by such "beat concerto" masterpieces as Little Anthony and the Imperials' 'Goin' Out of My Head', Bell was - with Smokey Robinson and Curtis Mayfield - one of the few black

producers to demonstrate the vision and ambition of Bert Berns, Burt Bacharach, Teddy Randazzo and other backroom pop auteurs.

The Stylistics, meanwhile, had been going since 1968, with a lineup comprising lead singer Russell Thompkins, Jr., Herbie Murrell, Airrion Love, James Smith and James Dunn. Thompkins' voice was unrepentantly girly, about as unmacho as the black male voice has ever been, but one can see it as the missing link between Little Anthony, Al Green, and Prince. Bell took the voice and all but exaggerated its fey quality. Where the group's first hit 'You're a Big Girl Now' had sounded black - closer to the Chicago vocal group sound, or to Philly-soul pioneers the Intruders - 'Betcha' and co. were miles from the ghetto streets; were, dare one say it, a little white. When Bell and Creed wrote the hilariously naff 'Rock and Roll Baby' it was tantamount to admitting as much.

"There have been quite a few where people have said 'Huh? R&B? What are you getting at?'" Linda Creed said in 1975. "'You Make Me Feel Brand New' is different from what people think of in the context of an R&B tune. I don't think that we write R&B, but that's beside the point."

Like 'Betcha', the Stylistics' other smashes ('You Make Me Feel Brand New', 'I'm Stone in Love with You', 'You Are Everything') were sugar-sweet, buppie bubblegum. They were also more artless than either Bell's work with the Delfonics or his dazzling arrangements for Philadelphia International stars like the O'Jays. But they were effortlessly lovely, platforms for angelic harmonies. Over a bed of Rhodes piano, Bell sprinkled harps and woodwinds, then gave everything a wash of sweet strings. The brilliant 'People Make the World Go Round', meanwhile, was 'Papa Was a Rolling Stone' *a la* Bacharach and David, its chorus like a classic mid-'60s hit by Dionne Warwick. (Bell made his debt to Burt and Hal crystal clear when he had the Stylistics cover her 'You'll Never Get to Heaven'.)

Where Bell went to make further classics with the Spinners ('I'll Be Around'), with Warwick herself ('Then Came You', her gorgeous duet with said Spinners), and with Deniece Williams (1982's divine 'Waiting By the Hotline'), the Stylistics fell into the hands of schlockmeisters Hugo and Luigi - sometime producer of Sam Cooke - and of proto-disco overlord Van McCoy. They chalked up huge hits in Britain but thereafter languished in their native country. Worse, they fell out with each other, with Thompkins becoming the sworn enemy of the fellow members he saw as his musical inferiors.

Some will accuse me of playing the Guilty Pleasures card here, but like Prince I'm wholly sincere in my love of the sweet-soul classics the Stylistics made with Thom Bell. In the age of 50 Cent and Chamillionaire they offer a tenderness and a vulnerability - a beauty - that the world will always need.

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